Edmund Kirke (James R. Gilmore). Manuscript. [Biography of George Nixon Briggs (1796-1861), 20th Governor of Massachusetts]

Transcription

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customs prevailing in Congress and Washington society, he was a genial and valued companion with Southern as truly as with the delegation from his native State. It was his way of doing it," as one said, so pleasant and unobtrusive, so quiet and yet so firm. An incident will happily illustrate our meaning. Mr. Briggs did not believe in dancing; and his convictions on this point were tested as follows: While Governor of Massachusetts, he was present on a convivial occasion at the house of a friend in Boston, and before the company retired dancing was proposed. An accomplished young lady stepped forward and said, "Governor Briggs, may I have the pleasure of dancing with you?" His reply was prompt and humorous: "It has been currently reported that, on a similar occasion, I invited a young lady to dance with me; but she declined because I was the son of a blacksmith. I acknowledge the anvil; but I deny the premise; for I never danced in my life; besides, I am a Baptist,"

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and, as a people, we are not especially favorable to this practice; for the first account given in the Bible of a Baptist informs us that he lost his head in connection with a dancing party."

This witty repartee asserted his principles, and, at the same time, furnished more real enjoyment to the company than the dance could have done.

One additional fact is confirmatory of his honored position and substantial influence in Congress. His very first effort was upon the Apportionment Bill, and the National Intelligencer said of it, "He is probably the first member who ever changed a vote by a speech on the floor of Congress." A member from Kentucky said, after Mr. Briggs's speech, "I had made up my mind to vote for the bill, but the speech of the young

member from Massachusetts has convinced me that the bill is unjust to the old Revolutionary States, and I shall vote against it."

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When Mr. Briggs had served his constituents eight years in Congress, he wrote a letter to his constituents declining a reelection; but his popularity was so great and his labors as a National Representative so useful to the country, that the congressional convention of the Eleventh District refused to accept his declination, and renominated him by acclamation. He served them four years longer, and then peremptorily declined a reelection, saying, as he said, "In the quiet and repose of private life."

The people of Massachusetts, however, did not allow him a long retirement to private life. His services were too valuable to the public to consign to that continued quiet for which he sighed. In the autumn of 1843 he was elected Governor, and assumed the responsibilities of the office in January, 1844. He carried into the new position the same industry, fidelity, independence and religious principle that distinguished him in his congressional career. On first going to Boston, instead of patronizing the leading public houses, he went to

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the less fashionable Marlboro Hotel, because it was conducted upon temperance and religious basis. No intoxicating liquors were kept on sale, and morning and evening devotions were maintained, and grace was said at the public table. The religious journals commended his course, but some of the secular papers criticised him.

At the opening of the General Assembly he was elected President of the "Legislative Temperance Society;" and in a telling speech accepting the office, he said that "every member of the Legislature ought to be a member of it." From that time his personal and official influence was given to the cause promptly and cheerfully. No governor of Massachusetts, nor of any other State, ever attended more temperance meetings and made more temperance speeches during his gubernatorial career than Governor Briggs. He was sometimes criticised by prominent politicians; but such criticisms had not the weight of

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a feather with him. Near the close of his long service as Governor of Massachusetts, a public man called upon him to confer upon some political matters; and, before leaving, he remarked, "Governor, a few evenings since, among your friends, a matter came up in

which you were mentioned; but as it was personal I am not sure that I do right to speak of it."

"Oh, speak out, speak out," answered the Governor, very encouragingly.

"Well, then, our friends agreed that for one who occupies so honorable and dignified a position as Governor of the State, you attend too many temperance meetings, and make too many temperance speeches. They think it is not exactly the thing for a Governor."

With his accustomed suavity the Governor Briggs replied: "When you see those friends on your return give them my best respects and say to them, that in my opinion to attend temperance meetings and conventions

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and make temperance speeches, is not only the most dignified, but the most honorable as well as most useful employment the people of Massachusetts can put their Governor to; and that while I am Governor I shall continue at this business."

After his first election to the governorship, a neighbor in Pittsfield bantered him upon his teetotalism and his old habit of wearing a plain black stock without any collar. "Boston society will compel you to abandon both," he said. When he had occupied his high position several weeks, in a letter to his uncle, he said, "Tell Pomeroy I go it without collar or wine. These are going out of fashion. Tell him unless he comes in soon, he will be more out of fashion than I am without a collar! As for any thing stronger than wine I have not heard of any one being drunk since I have been in Boston. Such a thing, among well-bred people, belongs to a time far back."

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His independence and faithfulness, in the gubernatorial office, were manifest also in his appointments. A leading politician advised him to turn out of office the Democrats appointed by his predecessor (Gov. Morton) and fill their places with Whigs. He replied, "I must say, frankly, I am sorry to learn that this is your view, because I regret exceeding to find myself differing from one with whom on such subjects I have long usually concurred and whose judgment I so highly prize. I believe, in the first place, that to turn out a single man appointed by our opponents, merely because he is not on our side in politics, when he is faithfully discharging his duties, would be wrong; and, in the second place, that it would be unpolitic… There are things in which we, as a party, have censured the opposition most is for the practice of that odious principle, to the victor belong the spoils; and for turning men out of office on account of their political

principles… Though I should have filled many, perhaps all, of the places to which Governor Morton made appointments, with different men from those whom he appointed, still, as he did appoint them, so long as they do their duty well, I cannot remove

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them from office because they differ from me in politics. Of the correctness of this course I have no doubt; and I cannot depart from it without violating my own sense of right and justice. If my friends approve this course I shall be glad; if not, and they prefer to put one in my place who would act differently, I should retain the consciousness of having acted according to the dictates of my own judgment; and that consciousness I need not say to you, would be of more value to me when I must render a final account of my stewardship than every thing else."

It was the firmness with which he adhered to his religious convictions that repelled office-seekers and time-servers from him. At the close of his public life, he said, "During the seven years I was governor of Massachusetts, I nominated four judges of the Supreme Court, and fourteen of the Court of Common Pleas. I do not now remember in all the appointments that there was a personal request from a single one of the persons appointed, or anything like a personal solicitation

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on the part of their friends." About the same time he said to a friend, "I never spent a penny to promote my election to any office I ever held."

The noble aim and spirit of the man appears in his private correspondence while he was Governor. In a letter to his nephew, who was practising law in the city of Cleveland, Ohio, he writes, "I have understood that there is a prospect of your becoming a candidate for Congress. If it comes, let it come of itself. I have no fear of your doing anything improper to get a nomination or an election. Let any political place or promotion be regarded as an incident, and not relied upon as anything in getting it, or in it after it is attained; which cannot be looked back upon with complacency, or in doing which you may expect the approbation of Him whose friendship is life and whose loving kindness is better than life."

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He was Governor seven years in all—longer than any other Chief Magistrate of the Commonwealth ever served except Caleb Strong, who was Governor from 1800 to 1807

and again from 1812 to 1816. To say that no Governor of Massachusetts ever endeared himself more generally to the people than Governor Briggs did is to say what is a matter of history.

On retiring from public office he returned to the practice of law. At the end of three years he was appointed a Judge of the Court of Common Pleas, in which capacity he served five years.

His deep interest in philanthropic enterprises added to his great popularity, turned the attention of public bodies to him for presiding officer. At the time of his decease he was President of the American Tract Society, the Baptist Foreign Missionary Union, the National Temperance Union, the State Sabbath School Union, and the Berkshire Insurance Company.

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His gentle and sweet temper was especially attractive in the domestic and social circle. Such union of moral courage and firmness with the delicate and loving elements of human character as was found in him is almost without a parallel. The independence and valor of a man was united with the tenderness and love of a woman. Even birds and beasts responded to this habitual expression of his affectionate nature. The chickens hailed his coming to their yard by flocking to his feet, flying upon his shoulders and arms, and literally covering him with their wings. The doves flew from their cotes to greet him as a friend, alighting upon his head and eating from his hand. The family horse also soon recognized his voice above all others, and came running from the remotest corner of the farm at his call; none of these animals behaved thus toward any other person. A good understanding appeared to be established between them and him, originating in that beautiful manifestation of his character in question. Many anecdotes are related of him illustrative of the tender qualities mentioned, as well as of his genuine neighborly kindness and large benevolence. We give place to a few of them.

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Passing a humble dwelling one day, in the suburbs of Pittsfield where he lived, he saw a woman in the yard crying bitterly. “What is the trouble?” he inquired. “My husband has put me out of the house and won’t let me come in,” she answered. Governor Briggs stepped directly to the door and rapped. There was no response at first, but he rapped again and again, until the husband opened the door, evidently feeling much compromised by the situation. “What appears to be the matter here?” asked the Governor. “Oh, nothing, nothing,” the crest-fallen husband replied. “Why, the woman ought not to be out of doors who she is crying.” “Yes, but she can come in if she wants

to," said the man. "Will you give your consent that she come in?" The Governor asked in a very persuasive way. The husband turned to his wife and extended a cordial invitation to her to come in, which she promptly accepted. The Governor bade them "good bye" and passed on. Sometime afterwards a neighbor remarked, "Nine out of ten persons would have passed on and done nothing; and I have never heard any more hard words from that quarter since."

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At one time he was on the train for Boston, and the car was crowded. At a station between Westfield and Springfield two women entered, one of them carrying a child. No gentleman arose to offer them a seat until the Governor stepped in and conducted the mother with her child to his seat. Then a dozen gentlemen offered to the other lady and to the Governor their seats. The latter, however, stood and chatted with the ladies, sometimes endeavoring to soothe the child, whose cries indicated weariness and need of sleep.

A gentleman who accompanied Governor Briggs related the foregoing incident to his daughter, and added the following which occurred before the train reached Boston:

"As we approached the Brookline bridge we found that a collision had taken place completely blocking the passage until the wreck of two trains was removed. It was necessary for the passengers to clamber over the wreck and through it to reach the relief train, while their baggage was sent to the city by the highway.

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But among the passengers was an old Irish woman, one of those wrong-headed and ignorant people who never can be made to see the necessity of anything out of their ordinary course. She would not leave and could not be separated from her trunk—a rude, hair-covered chest. Most men would have been merely amused, at least indifferent to her troubles; but ludicrous as was her grief, it was piteous and real; and such, however uncouth and groundless, never failed to touch the heart of the Governor. He, when having passed from one to another, imploring aid, she came to him; perceiving at once the uselessness of explaining matters to her, he quietly took hold of one end of the trunk and helped her carry it over the tottering wreck. She profuse and grateful expressions of thanks of the woman and her still more profuse and quaint apologies, when she found who had played the porter for her, were extremely amusing; but I will venture to say that there were few present who did not enjoy your father his promptness and willingness to confer happiness by so simple an act, even upon so rude a creature

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as this, and that while detracting nothing from the dignity of his position."

The same gentleman was on Martha's Vineyard, a few days afterwards, and employed one of the islanders to convey him home. On learning that his passenger was from Pittsfield, the islander remarked, "Governor Briggs lives there!" "Yes, he does," the gentleman answered. "I love that man; I always shall," the driver continued; "I am a Democrat, but I always vote for George N. Briggs. He's got a heart—he has." "How did you find that out?" the gentleman inquired. The reply was as follows: "When the Governor was reviewing the militia at New Bedford, I was standing directly behind him with my little daughter in my arms. The child begged to see the Governor and the troops; but the crowd and my position made it difficult for me to show her either; but the Governor happening to hear her entreaties, turned round, took her in his arms, and placing her on his horse in front of him, showed her the soldiers, and then with a kiss returned her to her father—a pleased child and a grateful father, as you may well believe

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I have loved him for that and I always shall."

His biographer relates that two Irishmen were passing a daguerrean shop in Pittsfield, where an excellent likeness of Governor Briggs hung at the window. They stopped to look at it. "Sure as me soul," said one, "that's Governor Briggs." "He was a good man and a real friend to the poor. If ever a man gets square into heaven it's he." "This is very good of you," replied the other; "but Pat, wasn't he a heretic?" Pat answered, "I'll dare say he was; but he had the true religion in him after all; and Saint Peter, as I'm thinking, won't mind his asking what he was when he opens the door to let him in."

Among the many sick ones upon whom the Governor called with substantial aid was a poor girl who toiled in the mill until she reddened the snow with the blood she raised from her lungs going to and from her daily task, impelled by the necessity of supporting her aged mother and invalid sister. When this Christian girl was struck with death, she sent for Governor Briggs. He hurried to her bedside; when, in a whisper, she said, "Mr. Briggs,

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I want to ask you to be so good to H. and mother when I am gone, as you have been to me. Sir, poor girl, is feeble; nobody knows her; and I fear when I am gone no one will have sympathy for her; and Mr. Briggs, I want to thank you and your family for your

goodness to me. But I can't talk much." "Don't try any more," replied the Governor, promising to fulfil her dying request. "Are you on the Rock?" continued the Governor. "Yes," the dying girl answered feebly, and expired. On turning away, and wiping the tears from his eyes, he said, "Oh, what a beautiful spirit was that, and what a rebuke for the ingratitude of those of us who have an abundance of the things of this life."

One day he was standing in the barber's shop of the village, waiting for a thunder shower to pass over. A colored girl came along hurriedly, without cloak or umbrella; and the Governor stepped out and put his umbrella into her hand. Several townsmen were speaking of the deed, when one of the number remarked, "Any body could do that." "Yes," another answered, "but only Governor Briggs did do it."

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After the Governor's death, a gentleman who was the principal baker of the town for many years, stated that annually, just before Thanksgiving, he would come to him and say, "See that all the poor families in the village who are not able, in your judgment, to provide for themselves, are supplied with every thing necessary for a nice and bountiful dinner, from a turkey or fowls to a dessert, and tea and sugar; and be sure let none of them know who sends it. When all is done send the bill to me, and I will give you my check for the amount." The gentleman added, "This was done until I left the business."

The need no other proof that Governor Briggs never felt above any business that was useful and necessary. Humility was a crown jewel in his character. There was no vain pride in his heart. Once, at the close of the annual meeting of the American Baptist Missionary Union, as he was leaving the church, he overheard a gentleman saying, "It is strange that the Governor of Massachusetts should be President of a Baptist Missionary Society." The Governor immediately turned and said, "Sir, I think it more strange

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The tidings of his death were flashed over the country and filled the sorrow to a multitude of hearts. Both the secular and religious press commemorated the sad event by tender and appropriate eulogies. A New York correspondent of the Watchman and Reflector wrote:

"Towards the close of last week the hearts of thousands in this State, as well as far abroad throughout the land, were saddened by the intelligence of the great loss sustained by Massachusetts, in the death of Gov. George N. Briggs. Few men in this

nation were more truly honored, more profoundly loved. Few men in public life have ever exhibited a combination of intellectual and moral qualities so well adapted to inspire universal confidence. His character was transparent. His aims were high and honorable. Every one who approached him trusted in him. As a man, a citizen, a statesman, and a Christian, he stood far above all partisanship, and commanded respect from every class of society and every grade of political opinion. He was a mighty prince amongst us; he swayed…"

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a potent sceptre; in an important sense it may be said that his honors were undisputed because all felt proud of conceding them; and in many a contest he gained an easy conquest, he cause no man felt humiliated by yielding him the palm of victory."

The citizens of Pittsfield, in public meeting assembled, adopted resolutions offered by Hon. Thomas Colt, in which they said,

"A man who in social and private life had the power to draw all hearts to him; who in charities, ever had a heart so large and a hand so noble that the poor blessed him while living, and many will rise up and call him blessed now that he is gone; a man who, in all the relations of private life, as a friend and a neighbor, has seldom had an equal; who, in all the relations of public office and public life, was never accused of mean or unworthy motives; who met the expectations of all, fulfilled the most arduous and delicate trusts and responsibilities so as to be entitled to the gratitude of all; who, during the very long period which he served in Congress, and as the chief

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Magistrate of this ancient Commonwealth, made a deep impression upon his associates of his honesty, sincerity, and lofty moral principles; who, as an advocate and example of temperance, made a deep impression on his generation; who, as a Christian gentleman, was a bright example of all that was courteous in intercourse, all that was humble in self-estimation, and all that was pure and lofty in hopes; the man in whom were so united the grave and the cheerful, the strong and the lovely parts of human character,—that we might truly say

'The elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, this was a man.'"

His biographer writes,

"Unquestionably the public life of Governor Briggs was cast in a rare mould. Without the severe assumption that venality is a general characteristic of men in office—it is certainly true, that

multitudes of them are not controlled by such principles of honor and rectitude as those which fashioned and adorned the whole public

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career of the man upon whose life we are entering. He was an exception to most men in Congress and in the chair of the Chief Magistrate; not in the creed of political ethics—yet certainly in the practice of them.

“His character commends itself impressively to the young men of the nation who are aspiring, as he did not perhaps, to its honors and trusts. They may indeed seize them without his virtue, but without that they certainly will not wear them to the lasting honor of their names, or to the true benefit of their generation. There was throughout his public service no hour and no act in which he could not have been truly described in the well-known words, ‘justum et tenacem propositi virum’—a man just and steady of purpose.”